

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

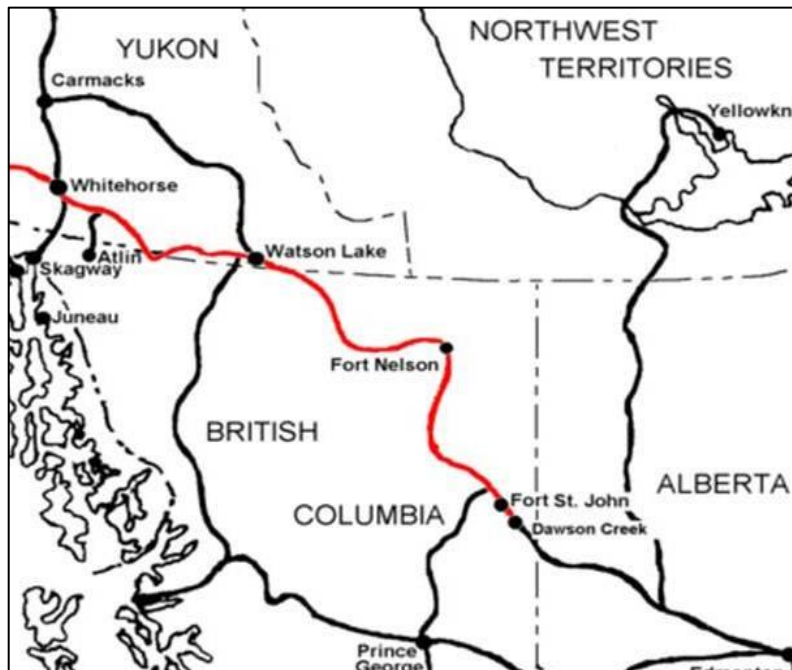
The Alaska Highway: Traveling with Beau

Author's Note: This is the seventh in a series of stories reflecting on a 2007 trip to Alaska with my dog, Beau. During that trip I began a personal journey to an expanded understanding of One Health, the implications of which would unfold over several years.

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
October 31, 2014

Day Seven (British Columbia)

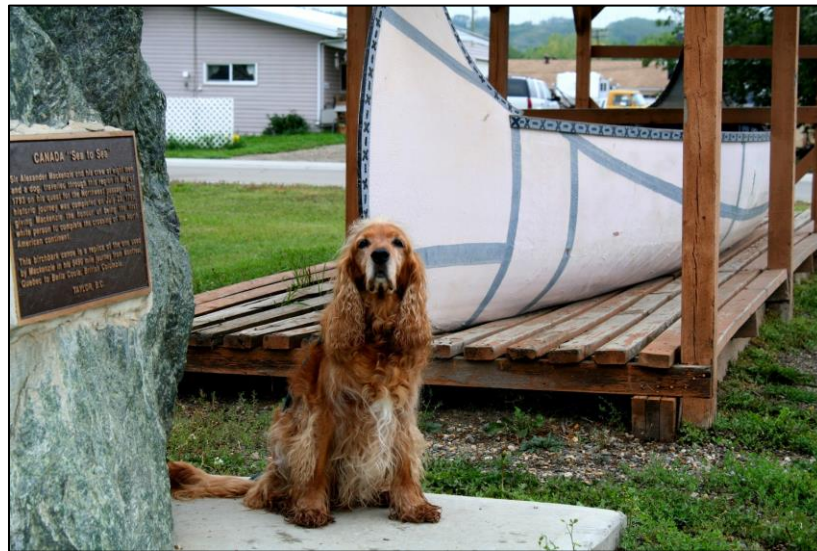
Stretching almost 1,400 miles west, the Alaska Highway starts at Dawson Creek (mile 0), then courses through northeastern British Columbia before crossing the Rockies and entering the Yukon just before Watson Lake. It reaches the territorial capital of Whitehorse at historic milepost 918, the next stop on our trip.



Map of the Alaska Highway in British Columbia and the Yukon
Adapted by the author, 2010

By midmorning, Beau needed an extended break to loosen up so we stopped at the little town of Taylor. Both of us ran up and down a long boulevard-like stretch of green grass next to the monument honoring Alexander MacKenzie, the first white explorer to make the

transcontinental crossing to the Pacific Ocean (1793). With just nine men and a dog—MacKenzie simply called him "Our Dog"—the explorers made the journey a decade before Lewis and Clark's more famous journey farther south.



Beau and the Monument, CANADA "Sea to Sea," commemorating the first transcontinental journey across North America with nine men and a dog
(Photo by the author, 2007)

Seven hours later, we pulled into Fort Nelson and found a pet-friendly motel for the night. We had traveled 770 km in one day, but tomorrow would be longer yet as we had a reservation at Whitehorse's famous Gold Rush Inn for the night.

As we sat on the lawn eating a very late dinner, I chatted with a family that had just crossed our next day's route, but from west-to-east. Two preteen children, too exhausted to speak, clung to their parents like half-hung wallpaper. "It's a magnificent drive," said the father, "but be careful in the mountains because the animals are all over the road." As we snuggled closely that night, Beau sensed my excitement for the morrow. It could not come soon enough.

Day Eight (The Yukon)

We went for our morning walk in the dark with a billion stars fenestrating the inky sky. Beau ate nothing and neither did I, apprehension, or perhaps just excitement, curtailing our appetites. Across from our motel, we pulled into a gas station alongside a huge tractor trailer with 'Lydan' written on its side. The driver, a big man named "Jon-without-an-h," looked admiringly at Beau and then generously shared his coffee while coaching me about what to expect on this most challenging portion of the Alaska Highway.

I watched Jon ascend the steep tractor stairs and balance his center of gravity in the massive cockpit. He rolled the rig forward, then stopped and turned back to me. For a brief moment, our eyes met and he said with an ascetic tone:

"Just stay alert for animals, some days you see none, but other days you roll around a corner going too fast, and find a bull moose standing in the middle of the road staring down at you. And be careful in the mountains. They are treacherous if you take the corners too quickly, especially Suicide Hill."

Then his final admonition,

"Don't drive like dumb-shit, and maybe I'll see you two at the hot springs for breakfast."

And off he went with us behind him, our headlights focused on the big rig. That worked well until we entered the mountains 60 km later, when Jon pulled off at a truck turnout to test his brakes and we moved out in front. We were on our own now, peering into the black morning as the caution signs for moose and other animals reminded us that we were not really alone.

At our second pit stop of the morning, the stillness of the mountain air was punctuated by a blast of a truck horn. I was about to grumble about the monster rushing by, when I caught the hearty wave and bright smile of Jon as he leap-frogged us. He would have breakfast without us. Sadly, we never saw him again, but whenever we saw a Lydan truck, or witnessed a driver doing "dumb shit"—and that was often—I thought of "Jon-without-an-h."

We had been traveling alone in the mountains for over an hour, with the sun now shining brightly in the rear view mirror, when I spotted two caribou walking down the middle of the road towards us. Beau saw them at exactly the same time, and he sat up straight, whining and jiggling all over as he peered intently through the windshield.



Male caribou and young along the Alaska Highway
(Photo by the author, 2007)

We spent the next 20 minutes watching the caribou beside the road, as they periodically returned to the road to advance a few yards, then ambled off into the brush. I would like to have stayed with the gangly pair all day, but we were almost 800 km from Whitehorse, so we left our parking spot on the shoulder and began to accelerate. Almost on cue, the more mature caribou strolled out into the road just in front of us and proceeded to walk right slowly, just a few feet from our bumper. For the next 10 minutes, we inched forward as the buck moved to the side of the road, then crossed back into our path. His game continued until we crested a hill when they dashed into the brush and were gone.

The scenery along the road was breathtaking as we traveled through the Canadian Rockies, with fast-moving rivers racing along the road beside us. Occasionally we would come to a large reflecting lake, with the vistas reflected below the surface as stunning as the scenery above.



One of the reflecting lakes along the Alaska Highway
(Photo by the author, 2007)

Suicide Hill had extraordinarily tight curves and only a narrow shoulder buffering what would be a precipitous descent. Two sets of floral markers bore testament to those who had been unable to control their vehicle, perhaps on icy mornings. One of the wreaths contained in its circle the picture of a double-long rig that apparently went over the edge carrying the good-looking young man who was pictured beside his truck.

By midmorning, we had seen over 20 Stone sheep: ewes with sharp points on the horns and flat-headed calves still waiting for the first buds to appear. Males with rugged horns stood watch beside the road or perched in the rocky ledges high above.



Stone sheep ewe and lamb beside the road
(Photo by the author, 2007)

We arrived at the Liard River Hot Springs about noon but Jon's rig was not among the parked vehicles. The springs were popular with tourists, many in large motor homes with small dogs bouncing from side to side across the driver's seat, appeared to be in a jovial mood. Beau and I gathered a hearty feast of chicken and vegetables from the convenience store and had a lazy lunch, mine followed by a long nap.



Sign Post Village at Watson Lake, barely closer to New York City than Tokyo, Japan
(Photo by the author, 2007)

We crossed the British Columbia-Yukon border near Watson Lake, the midpoint of our day's journey, and stopped at Sign Post Forest. Locals call it "*the world's largest collection of stolen property*" as there are signs from hometowns around the world. Legend has it that the first sign was placed in 1942 by a homesick US Army GI who was one of the thousands sent north to build the Alaska Highway. He erected a sign pointing towards his hometown of Danville, Illinois. Now housing over 10,000 signs in neat crisscrossing rows, one could spend an afternoon observing the ways tourists have cleverly celebrated their favorite places.

Since it was a blazing hot afternoon, the friendly staff invited Beau to be a VIP guest for cold water and doggy snacks. And I enjoyed an extended conversation with them. It was late in the afternoon when we finally said goodbye to our new friends, promising to visit them on our return trip (we did). The Rocky Mountains behind us, we drove on towards Whitehorse and a two-night stay at the Gold Rush Inn.

¹Smith, Donald F. Traveling with Beau: My 34-day Trip to a Deeper Understanding of One Health. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, September 9, 2014.

Smith, Donald F. Returning to my Canadian Roots: Traveling with Beau. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, September 11, 2014.

Smith, Donald F. From Ontario to Wisconsin: Traveling with Beau. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, October 16, 2014.

Smith, Donald F. A Lesson in Humility: Traveling with Beau. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, October 17, 2014.

Smith, Donald F. The Canadian Prairie: Traveling with Beau. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, October 21, 2014.

KEYWORDS:

Human-animal bond
One Health
Traveling with a dog
Alaska Highway
Yukon

TOPICS:

One Health

LEADING QUESTION:

What State does the Alaska Highway traverse (answer; none – it mostly crosses British Columbia and the Yukon Territory in Canada on its way to Alaska)

META-SUMMARY:

The author continues his journey across America with his dog.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.